

When I was born in North Carolina in 1950, we had 22,000 Catholics, about the same percentage of fans who will be wearing Carolina blue at the game tomorrow. And we probably were not any more popular than the visitors at the Notre Dame stadium.

While my parents made certain that all seven of their children practiced our faith, it was not an issue that we discussed a lot in public. I remember JFK running for president in 1960 and I was 9 years old at my dad's tobacco warehouse. We handed out cards for Kennedy often to hear, "Sorry, I ain't got much use for them Catholics."

I learned very early to work by deed rather than to preach the benefits of Catholicism to a warehouse full of farmers who did not fully appreciate the Pope. But I think they do appreciate much of what the church has to say.

Twenty years ago the U.S. Bishops shared their thoughts on the economy in a pastoral letter titled "Economic Justice for All." They discussed how we need broader social commitment to the economic good. The moral role of government, in their view, is to protect human rights and secure justice for all.

Okay, who can argue with that? But we have to put these words into action. Politics is one way to do that.

Benedict XVI said this in his first encyclical, that politics is needed for justice.

There is one theme upon which most major religions agree. In my faith, it is best explained as, "Whatever you do to the least of these, that you do unto me."

The political debate over this policy is not whether we help the least of these, but how, and how much.

The objective is clear. It is to set the right policy, one that helps all people reach their full potential so that they can make full use of their God-given talents. But, getting the policy right is only part of the job.

The other part, and often the most difficult, is building a consensus that will put those policies into action.

Governors must execute the laws. By the nature of our jobs, we have to get things done. We have to be more than an advocate or a strong voice. We have to produce.

We have to not only make the speeches, but also make the decisions and actually implement those things that we deem good public policy. Again, as St. Francis reminds us, the words are hollow without the action.

Articulating a grand vision is of no value if not followed with the planning, strategy and resources it takes to make the vision a reality. Leadership requires that populist rhetoric give way to consensus building.

I have found the most productive action results when we appeal to the very best in people. But we have to know the limits of their comfort zone and not invade too aggressively. Otherwise, we outdistance those we are trying to lead and they lose confidence in our vision.

And it is critical that we approach others with words they can appreciate and understand. Even those who may passionately disagree with us on an issue will at least listen and consider compromise if they are approached with respect for their views. And we must show less arrogance and more humility in the way we approach others.